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ABSTRACT

Remarks by the education administrator of the U. S. Department of Justice Bureau of Prisons discussing recidivism in relationship to various program elements: Relevancy of educational programs, participation rates, state administrative structures, inmate characteristics (educational level, skills, intelligence, age), and federal resources. Data is included on inmate course completions at five educational levels for fiscal years 1970-1975. It is concluded that "what works" is enrollment in relevant courses in which quality instruction is provided and persistence in courses until passing grades are received and established standards of excellence are met. (JT)

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What Works!

A Look At Effective Correctional Education and Training Experiences

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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What Works!!

A Look at Effective Correctional Education and Training Experiences

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It is very difficult even under the best circumstances to discover cause and effect relationships in human behavior. We know both from personal experience and extensive research that simplistic explanations are inaccurate and misleading. Despite the fact that most of us know this at the common sense level, human behavior researchers valiently continue to try to correlate specific causes and effects. Some of these research exercises result, in part, from the manner in which support funds are available. Researchers frequently find themselves trapped into asking questions which fit the priorities of funding agencies. Obviously, if the priority concern of a funding agency is recidivism and what, if anything, affects it, the creative

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researcher begins to hypothesize research questions designed to respond to that agency's concern. As a result, an amazing amount of research surfaces designed to measure relationships, for example, between participation in particular prison programs and recidivism. Some social scientists, trying to ascribe higher motives to their work, justify their research efforts on the expressed interests of legislators, criminal justice authorities and the general public, all of whom are seeking answers to "what works" in their desire to reduce crime rates.

The Individual Program and Recidivism

Despite these desires it is extremely unrealistic to try to measure the effectiveness of a particular prison program in terms of recidivism. To my view, this approach requires a complete suspension of common sense; further, it is an expensive exercise in futility. The total prison experience coupled with a multitude of such other factors as a person's life history and the quality of that life at the time of incarceration are much more relevant. Additionally, post-release

family and other socio-economic connections, if any, access to opportunity systems, mental and physical health and a host of other variables contribute substantially to an individual's behavior on release from incarceration. To try to measure the impact of an Adult Basic Education program, a high school diploma or a few college courses is a fool's errand.

In the words of Daniel Glaser, "The highway of correctional history is paved with punctured panaceas ....".

I believe this to be a sound observation despite several important studies which suggest that prison education and training programs have had some modest positive impact on post-release employment and, therefore, on recidivism. A careful reading of the literature beginning with Glaser (1964) and more currently with Lipton, Martinson and Wilks (1975) tell us, if they tell us anything, that the question of "what works" is a very complicated one. To suggest that any one effort alone "works" is as incorrect as the suggestion that nothing works.

Let us assume for the sake of discussion, and this is a tremendously tenuous assumption, that all prison programs are, in fact, bonafide programs which meet minimum qualitative standards of program legitimacy. How could anyone conceivably control for all other variables at work and isolate and measure only the impact of a particular program?

Inquiries into whether or not there is a correlation between a particular prison program and recidivism ask the wrong question.

What are the Right Questions?

What are some of the right questions? I'd like to suggest a few, at least as they relate to correctional education programs.

Program Participation Rates

Among the things that we can measure with some degree of precision are the number of enrollments in a particular education and training program, the number of people who complete the program, pass related examinations and meet appropriate accreditation standards. In this regard, for example, we know that in 1965, 635

federal prisoners took the High School Equivalency (GED) examination; in 1975 the number had increased to in excess of 4,000, an increase of over 500%. While we do not have pass-fail rates for earlier years we know that 72.8% of the inmates who took the GED test in 1975 passed; 16.9% failed and 10.3% did not complete the examination.

We also know that in 1975 there were over 8,000 vocational training program completions in the federal system compared with only 3,030 in 1970, an increase of 167%. Similarly, there were over 9,000 postsecondary course enrollments in 1975 compared with only 1,075 six years ago, up over 700%. Since 1970 education and training course completions in the federal system have increased 245%.

Bureau of Prisons - All Institutions

Inmate Course Completions	Fiscal Year					
Courses	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
Adult Basic Ed.	1,100	1,250	1,362	1,631	2,536	2,672
Secondary Ed.	1,970	2,100	1,828	2,182	3,328	4,288
Occup. Ed.	3,030	4,750	4,954	5,628	6,740	8,084
Social Ed.	1,366	1,481	1,881	2,908	3,693	5,303
Postsecondary Ed.	1,075	1,152	1,377	2,118	3,929	9,126
Total	8,541	10,733	11,402	14,467	20,226	29,473

Program Relevancy

Another group of important questions in correctional education which are susceptible to relatively accurate measurement relate to whether or not programs offered reflect the needs and desires of potential students.

It is also important to know whether or not correctional education and training programs provide quality instruction. One working definition of quality instruction is instruction which prepares students to meet nationally established performance standards in the field. If students pass the Federal Communications Commission's Second Class Radio Operator Licensing Examination after completion of an electronics course designed to prepare them for that field of work, we know something about the quality of the instruction in that course.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons along with many State correctional systems is working toward national

or other appropriate accreditation of as many education and training programs as possible. The International Medical Technologists Association, the American Radiologists Association, the American Society of Welders, the U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training and the Federal Communications Commission are among the national organizations which presently "certify" occupational training programs in federal correctional institutions.

If a course reflects the needs and desires of prisoner/students and if quality instruction is provided do these conditions contribute to a reduction in recidivism? I genuinely regret that the only way I believe we can answer that question is that we don't know. The case for education and training opportunities for prisoners must rest on essentially the same kinds of considerations which support education and training in the free world; namely that education and training <u>contribute</u> to preparation for self supporting and socially acceptable life styles. However, as in the free world, we cannot argue or prove that education and training <u>alone</u> govern behavior.

Common Sense Prevails

We see a great deal of evidence that this kind of common sense reasoning is at work and that it is acceptable to legislators and state and federal decision makers. Six states, for example, in recent years have established separate school districts to serve prison populations in those states. At least an equal number of additional states are considering this same approach. In the past education and training in many prisons received minimal support from inadequate correctional institution budgets. Security, decent food and lodging and other maintenance items had to have higher priorities than education and training programs. Education and training often ended at the bottom of the priority list in competition for scarce correctional budget dollars. The establishment of correctional school districts has provided separate funding for education and training programs in prisons.

Another important development which reflects the commitment to correctional education and training is the growing discussion in favor of correctional institutions devoted to education and training. Several

states and the Bureau of Prisons already have institutions where all or a considerable portion of a prisoner's time is devoted to education and training. New York, California and Texas are among the states which are seriously examining the desirability and feasibility of establishing prison colleges. Additionally, the Bureau now supports two half-way houses located on college campuses where prisoners attend college full time during the last year of their sentence.

Separate correctional school districts and the increase in the number of correctional institutions in which education and training receive priority attention are significant evidence that education and training opportunities are viewed as positive intervention tools. Despite this, however, no responsible correctional administrator fantasizes that education and training are or can be the determining factors in post-release behavior.

Recidivism and Education

Each innovative education and training program which has tried to make such a connection has been unable

to do so. For example, some practitioners and researchers tried to justify the continuation of college level "Newgate" programs supported by the Office of Economic Opportunity by alleging an impact on recidivism.

The Marshall, Kaplan, Gans and Kahn (1973) evaluation showed that there was no such connection and for very good reasons. Similarly, Manpower Development and Training Administration (MDTA) programs tried to justify their existence on recidivism impact. Abt Associates (1971) estimated that 5% fewer prisoners recidivated if they had the benefit of MDTA training in prison. While some people regarded this 5% difference as a significant others did not. In any case, both the Newgate and MDTA evaluations were based on a limited number of years of post-release behavior and we don't know if the MDTA 5% positive impact would have held up over a longer post-release study period. Despite these and similar findings, common sense prevails and few, if any, argue that we discontinue or even curtail education and training programs for

prisoners. Quite the contrary; there is increasing pressure from all quarters for more varied and more relevant programs.

The Future

There is evidence that the average level of educational attainment of incarcerated offenders is moving upward. In previous years we estimated that approximately 25% of federal prisoners had completed a high school education. In 1975 40% of federal prisoners claimed completion of a 12th grade education. The corresponding figure for incarcerated offenders at the local and state levels is probably somewhere lower than 40%, possibly in the neighborhood of 30%. The national average for high school completions is close to 70%.

At the same time there is also a good deal of evidence that the majority of all prisoners lack a marketable skill and have no history of stable employment, regardless of their academic achievement level.

Further, it is significant that fifty percent of federal prisoners have an "average" intelligence

score and 37% an "above average" score; only 13% test at lower than average. There are many reasons to believe that this general profile also reflects the educability potential of most state and local prisoners.

The difference between the education achievement level of the average offender and the corresponding figure for the population at-large and the information which suggests positive potential to respond to education efforts, defines, in part, the priority challenge of correctional education during the immediate future. Further, the presence of many individuals in prison who have completed secondary education but at the same time lack even entry level occupational skills and, equally important, lack critical life adjustment coping skills will also shape future education and training program goals.

Conclusion

It appears, at least from the federal vantage point, that there are substantial resources available today to meet these challenges plus the necessary support of correctional administrators, line staff and

significant decision makers in the legislative and public sectors. Further, in the federal correctional system we are moving increasingly toward voluntary involvement in all programs, including education and training, and away from program involvement designed primarily to win the favor or parole boards and commissions. Voluntarism, we hope will exert positive pressures on correctional education administrators to develop more varied and higher quality programs in order to insure meeting the real needs and desires of prisoner/students.

All prison programs need to meet many objectives not the least of which is the positive use of the prisoners' time while incarcerated. Education and training programs by their very nature meet this fundamental objective.

Finally, to answer the question, what works? Quality education and training works, if by "works" we mean enrollment in relevant courses in which quality instruction is provided, persistence in courses until passing grades are received and established standards of excellence are met.

If each prison experience, and there are many in the mosaic, could contribute these kinds of positive involvements and results many things would change, including possibly "recidivism".

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